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SUICIDA'S SECRET WAR

*How one contra got serious
about the battle to oust
the Sandinistas*

BY CHRISTOPHER DICKEY

IN DECEMBER 1981, Ronald Reagan signed a presidential finding that established a force for "paramilitary operations" against Nicaragua. This force became known as the "contras" or "counterrevolutionaries." Originally planned as a 500-man, covert CIA operation aimed at stopping arms traffic from Nicaragua to the rebels in El Salvador, the "secret war" became a catch phrase for Washington's attempts to pressure, harass and destabilize the Nicaraguan government. By 1985, the contra fighting force had grown to an estimated 10,000 men.

The largest contra faction, the Nicaraguan Democratic Force (FDN), operated out of Honduras crossing the border into Nicaragua to make raids on villages and Sandinista militia positions. Because U.S. support for the contras was part of a CIA-funded program, little was known initially about the FDN commanders, their forces and their tactics. Washington Post foreign correspondent Christopher Dickey was one of the first reporters to go behind contra lines.

In this excerpt from Dickey's book *With the Contras*, we join one FDN force under the command of Pedro Pablo Ortiz Centeno, known to his men as "Suicida." A former member of dictator Anastasio Somoza-Debayle's National Guard, the most feared of Somoza's security forces, Suicida earned his nom de guerre by taking his men into battles—and winning them—when other commanders and their troops would have died on the

battlefield. As a result of the loyalty from his troops and those directly under him, his lieutenants Krill and Cancer, a loyalty surpassing that held by the men for the FDN itself. In their devotion to Suicida, these troops waged their own war, a war out of FDN control and, ultimately, beyond the scope of anything Washington had envisioned. Though the CIA and the FDN supported Suicida's war at first, ultimately Suicida and his men became a matter of international embarrassment for them.

BY NOVEMBER 1982, Suicida had his men, he had his guns and he felt ready for his kind of war: big attacks looking for big wins. First they would eliminate the Sandinista outposts along the border, then they would push their forces deep inside the narrow northern tip of Nueva Segovia in Nicaragua. They would attack Jalapa itself. If they could take it, they would call in support on the airstrips around the town, and reinforcements overland from Honduras. They would declare a liberated territory. Then the war to oust the communists could get serious.

At FDN headquarters in Tegucigalpa, Honduras, however, there did not seem to be much enthusiasm for this idea. The general staff toyed with it. It sounded good. But the men at the other bases were still in training, and they did not want to act until everyone was ready—if then. In the middle of November, without orders from Tegucigalpa, and on his own account, Suicida began his infiltration and his offensive in the Segovias.

The initial attacks were small. Most of Suicida's new recruits were raw; many could not be relied on to fight. But the Sandinista forces they were up against were often half-trained militiamen as raw as anyone in their own ranks. As Suicida's people gained experience in little ambushes and engagements the scope of the fighting grew. Krill and Cancer were spearheading the operation, and well past Providencia they had yet to encounter major resistance. The only problem was ammunition. The new recruits wasted a lot and they were running out quickly. Suicida started calling to the other bases asking for support, trying to draw them into the fight. But one by one the responses came back over the radio. "Negative." Now he called Tegucigalpa. He had an offensive going. He was giving hell to the Sandinistas, couldn't they tell that? And, however reluctantly, they began diverting supplies to his camp to try to sustain him.

The general staff in Tegucigalpa had not known what to do about Suicida's offensive when it began. But they soon saw that, at least in the short term, it could give them the credibility they wanted as a fighting force. He was inside Nicaragua, he was fighting, and he was holding his own.